

Garamendi criticizes state budget impasse
Says long-standing issues aren't being addressed

By LARRY PARSONS

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A day after an \$18 billion state budget deficit package evaporated in Sacramento, Lt. Gov. John Garamendi bemoaned the actions of Republicans and Democrats in the protracted financial feud.

Already an announced Democratic candidate for governor next year, the 32-year veteran of California politics said the budget battle is unlike anything he has seen since entering Sacramento politics in 1975.

"There is not a movement toward agreement — no compromise," Garamendi said in a meeting with The Monterey County Herald's editorial board Wednesday.

There is no urgency, no aspiration to compromise or to negotiate, he said.

He criticized Republican legislators, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Democratic lawmakers for the long budget battle in the midst of the state's economic crisis.

"I really don't know what the governor is up to," Garamendi said.

He said Democrats have agreed to deep spending cuts in the past five years, while Republicans have dug in around a no-new-taxes pledge.

Garamendi, who has been using his positions as a University of California regent and California State University trustee to battle student fee hikes and funding cuts for higher education, said long-standing issues from prison reform to tax-policy overhaul go unaddressed.

"This is not new stuff," he said. "I'd like to be governor right now. I know how things can be solved."

He said he would favor a state constitutional convention to tackle fundamental issues,

including the size of legislative districts, term limits, redistricting and the supermajority requirement to pass a budget, that make state governance difficult.

But the current political process, which is aimed more at producing winners and losers than two winners through compromise, is stifling progress, he said.

"I know California is an extraordinary place and we are in danger of losing that," he said.

A top goal for Garamendi is to get the University of California to transform the new UC-Merced campus into a medical school to train doctors and nurses for physician-poor regions of the state.

"It would be only marginally more expensive than educating history majors," he said.

Garamendi, one of the architects of the Clinton administration's climate change agenda, said he and the governor share similar ideas about the issue. As for their overall relations, he said, "We have a responsible and proper relationship."

Several Democrats are expected to run for governor next year, including former governor and current Attorney General Jerry Brown, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom. The field could include Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.

But Garamendi, alluding to this week's dustup between Feinstein and the incoming Obama administration over selection of former Central Coast Rep. Leon Panetta as CIA director, joked

that Feinstein would probably stay in the Senate "unless she really got mad at Leon."

He said the race will be a marathon and predicted he could beat any of the Democrats.

As for former eBay executive Meg Whitman, a probable frontrunner among Republicans in the governor's race, Garamendi said he would relish asking her how her experience with the online shopping Web site prepared her for running state government.

Garamendi poked at state Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner, another leading GOP contender. The lieutenant governor said Poizner is trying to scrap insurance industry regulations protecting consumers that date back to Garamendi's days as the state's insurance regulator.

Garamendi said the Wall Street meltdown showed "there is a place for regulation in every part of the economy."

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John Garamendi Age: 63 Party: Democrat Job: State lieutenant governor since 2007.
Background: Thirty-two years in public service Experience: State's first elected insurance commissioner, winning the job in 1990 and 2002. Deputy secretary in Department of Interior under President Clinton. Fourteen years in state Senate and two years in Assembly. Education: Graduate of University of California-Berkeley, where he was all-conference and academic All-American football player. MBA from Harvard University. Family: He and wife, Patti, worked in Ethiopia as Peace Corps volunteers. They live near Sacramento and operate a cattle ranch in the Sierra Nevada and have six children and six grandchildren.